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Keeanga Taylor on **Race and the Obama Era**

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I years were radical times of assertive dissent. Yet, the estrangement of black socialists and later black communists suggest that the left did not always hear their black members, either out of a myopic ideological commitment to a political analysis that did not consider the interplay of both class and race factors in shaping the American political landscape, or a kind of racial arrogance that relegated black members to the periphery of the policy making process. For some black members, this estrangement resulted in the integration into the American political mainstream, and for others, it meant the pursuit of another strain of political radicalism, Black Nationalism. Harrison is different from some of the disillusioned in that his embrace of Black Nationalism did not mean a rejection of socialism, but a rejection of the Socialist party.

Scholars and students of Harlem, Afro-American, and Afro-Caribbean history in the United States are indeed indebted to Jeffrey

Perry for this magisterial study of Hubert Harrison whom A. Philip Randolph called the "Father of Harlem Radicalism." Volume one of this biography should be read in conjunction with Perry's edited volume of Harrison's writings, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*.<sup>4</sup> Readers will eagerly await volume two of Perry's biography as he takes the Hubert Harrison saga from 1919 to his death in 1927, covering Harrison involvement with Garvey, the Harlem Renaissance, and other political and cultural currents in black America.

## NOTES

1. Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth Century America* (London: Verso, 1998), 126.
2. *Ibid.*, 127, 128.
3. Joyce Moore Turner, *Caribbean Crusaders and the Harlem Renaissance* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 43.
4. Jeffrey Perry, ed., *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

## Peasants or Empire?

RICHARD W. FRANKE

THE COMMUNITY OF San Juan Bautista de Catacaos lies in the far northwestern corner of Peru. In the 1970s more than 10,000 hectares of irrigated land plus a large amount of barren land were converted into state-controlled cooperatives by the leftist military government of General Juan

Velasco Alvarado. The politically mobilized peasants of Catacaos used the breakup of the power of the traditional haciendas to create their own "communal units of production." The communal units forged processing and marketing alliances with the local state-controlled coops. These units eventually encompassed

### The New Peasantries: Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in an Era of Empire and Globalization

JAN DOUWE VAN DER PLOEG

London and Sterling, Virginia: Earthscan Books, 2009, 287 pp. plus notes, bibliography and index, \$36.10

6,750 hectares on which 4,500 worker-owners produced food and generated employment. In the 1990s, however, the right-wing government of Alberto Fujimori broke up the state co-ops

RICHARD W. FRANKE, *Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey; Resident and Board Member, Ecovillage at Ithaca, Ithaca, New York.*

and undermined the local communal units by making bank credit harder to acquire and by supporting private competitors' efforts to control the nearby water supply that comes mainly from the Chira River. As peasant resources declined, a private agribusiness enterprise bought up cheaply 2,670 hectares to produce organic bananas and other foods including asparagus that goes to the nearby port for loading onto Maersk cargo ships. "Fresh" Peruvian asparagus is shipped to Poland where it is scattered onto frozen pizzas for West European consumers.

In the village of Zwiggelte, in the north-east Dutch Province of Drenthe in the first decade of the current century a group of farmers began meeting to discuss ways to overcome the declining value of their potato harvests and the small additional income from dairy farming and pig raising. Having heard of a new kind of natural gas pump recently developed in Germany, they devised a plan to integrate it into a combination of agricultural waste, selective and careful use of forest reserves and manure that produced high quality natural gas. In addition to selling the gas to the national company they added an electrical generator for local power. The heat from the electrical generator was channeled into a local bungalow park and outdoor swimming pool that extended the local tourist season.

The two case studies of Catacaos and Zwiggelte illustrate two extremes in the power struggle between peasants and "Empire." In Catacaos, Empire won out while in Zwiggelte a local, decentralized peasant movement succeeded in raising the quality of life while maintaining or even expanding local autonomy. The many dimensions of this struggle make up the central themes of the ambitious book by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg here under review.

In *The New Peasantries*, Ploeg covers a wide range of empirical data and analytical issues. The first chapter sets out a complex scene with capitalist, peasant, and entrepreneurial farming

types interacting with various societal linkages and historical transitions. The second chapter contains a lengthy overview of differing conceptions of peasants. Chapters three through eight provide case studies of peasants in

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Catacaos, Italy, and The Netherlands competing with various emanations of Empire including the Italian-based dairy multinational Parmalat, the "global cow," entrepreneurial farming in general and the production of what the author calls "lookalike" food products (e.g. reconstituted milk sold as "fresh"). The final two chapters include a synthesis and some predictions about the future of especially European agriculture.

Ploeg's overall thesis is that "a crisis [in agriculture] is looming that for the first time in history concerns...quality of food, security of food delivery, the sustainability of agricultural production..." (p. 11) while negating the autonomy and self-worth of the primary producers of food. The main cause of the crisis is Empire, conceived in the Hardt and Negri sense — a "new order" that is controlled by the United States and the G8 nations, NATO, the IMF, the WTO, and multinational corporations. Ploeg, however conceives of Empire more abstractly as essentially an ordering and controlling mechanism, a connection maker, a rules drafter and enforcer. At one point he uses the metaphor of the railway system that facilitated to some extent the spread of the 19th century European empires.

Why is Empire so destructive of peasant

agriculture? According to Ploeg, Empire never produces anything — peasant farmers and others do that. But Empire extracts value by moving, rearranging, repackaging and rebranding products — Peruvian asparagus on European pizzas via Polish food factories. Shouldn't it be cheaper to grow the asparagus in Europe? Empire attempts to find the cheapest production locales and link them to the most expensive consumer markets. Fortunes are made by those who produce nothing and who sometimes crash their own multinationals — as in the case the author details of Parmalat — a sort of Enron of the food industry. The process of Empire sucks peasant farmers into giant systems of control. Information Technology tentacles reach out to every farm and cowshed with regulations, criteria, bookkeeping demands, inspections, and fines to keep small farmers under Empire's control. Everything is homogenized, leaving the land and other resources to succumb to neglect. Food is no longer fresh or nutritious or grown with sustainable practices: it is merely profitable.

Yet underneath the powerful forces of Empire, peasants find ways to resist and even to create somewhat viable alternatives. The farmers in Zwiggelte made use of their own genius and of democratic space in The Netherlands not yet taken control of by Empire. In a more extensive resistance, farmers in the nearby northern Dutch province of Frisia (or Friesland), an ethnic minority with their own language, managed to establish a network of cooperatives under the umbrella of the Northern Frisian Woodlands NFW [association]. With 80 percent of farmers in the area among its 900 members, this cooperative covers 50,000 hectares. Using energetic and sophisticated approaches to the national parliament, the co-op has been able to spar with the Ministry of Agriculture — otherwise an agent of Empire — to defend and improve several features of the local farming culture and environment including the hedgerows that mark off the fields, help

in water absorption, offer shelter for meadow birds, reduce wind, and provide medicinal foods for cattle. Most dramatically, the NFW demonstrated that local farmers could more effectively reduce nitrogen runoff from the fields with a locally-developed system of injecting cattle manure onto and into the fields rather than by following the EU rules for managing nitrogen that the Dutch Government attempted to impose. Empire lost — and the soils are richer, the cows healthier, the milk is higher quality and the farmers are financially better off. Nitrogen runoff is also under control.

Ploeg provides fascinating technical details of this struggle and the science related to it, but let me add something about the international ecological significance of his nitrogen case study. Nitrogen comes in organic and inorganic forms. Organic nitrogen results from life processes. It is a fairly stable compound that recycles well in properly designed systems. By contrast, inorganic nitrogen is manufactured via the Haber-Bosch process developed in Germany in the early 20th Century. Industrial inorganic nitrogen is now about 50 percent of all nitrogen found in soils and waterways on earth. Industrial nitrogen is unstable and tends to react with other chemicals. This “reactive nitrogen” is now considered one of the three greatest environmental threats to the earth's life support system — possibly equal to climate change and biodiversity loss in magnitude.<sup>1</sup> According to the 2005 Millennium Ecological Assessment, reactive nitrogen is a major cause of biodiversity loss, ozone destruction, eutrophication of waterways and the creation of “dead zones” such as in the Gulf of Mexico, and numerous human health problems ([www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx](http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx)). In Frisia, Empire pushed for regulations that were inferior to the creative impulses of local farmers who were able to actualize their innovations through the political agency of their territorial cooperative. It is an instructive and inspiring story.

*The New Peasantries* is a technical study that will fascinate experts and advanced students of Empire, of peasants and of post-modern theory. Other readers might find some of the material daunting and the dense and sometimes idiosyncratic flow of the text will be a challenge for many. One means of approaching this complex study is to read first a more introductory text that covers some of the basic issues. Brian Halweil's *Eat Here?* gives an overview of the problems of long-distance food production and its problems along with interesting examples of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) — a means found in many parts of the world to connect consumers directly to farmers who sell shares of the harvest in advance. CSAs guarantee fresh organic food to the buyers and a stable income to the farmers. CSAs can be taken to a higher level of aggregation when a farmers' market or cooperative supermarket is added to

the process. One example comes from Ithaca, New York, where Greenstar Cooperative Market links its 7,000 member-shoppers with dozens of organic farms within 30 miles ([www.greenstar.coop/](http://www.greenstar.coop/)). Greenstar itself is part of a network of 45 natural food coops in 12 eastern U.S. states.

Much of the material in *The New Peasantries* can be applied to North American farming and food networks. We should look forward to studies that will further explore the rich set of ideas presented in this book.

## NOTES

1. Rockström, Johan, et al. 2009. A safe operating space for humanity. *Nature* 461:472-475.
2. Halweil, Brian. *Eat Here: Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket*. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004)

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